

Message Text

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INFO AMCONSUL ASMARA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GERMANY

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON ENGLAND

S E C R E T ADDIS ABABA 1864

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, ET, SU, EG, IZ, SY

SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH MINCOMMERCE: EPMG MISSION TO ARAB
WORLD

REF: ADDIS 1752

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY. POL COUNSELOR HAD PRIVATE INFORMAL HOUR
LONG CONVERSATION WITH MINCOMMERCE MOHAMMED ABDURRAHMAN FEBRUARY
16 ON LAND REFORM, HIS PERSONAL SITUATION, THE OUTLOOK IN ERITREA
AND RECENT EPMG MISSION TO ARAB WORLD. DR. MOHAMED, WHO IS RANK-
ING MUSLIM OFFICIAL OF EPMG, WAS SENIOR MOSLEM MEMBER OF MISSION.
THIS MESSAGE SUMMARIZES SUBSTANCE OF HIS REMARKS ON ALL OF THESE
SUBJECTS EXCEPT LAND REFORM, WHICH TO BE COVERED IN SEPTTEL.

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BURDEN OF MINISTER'S REMARKS WAS THAT MISSION WAS IN FACT SUR-

PRISINGLY SUCCESSFUL GIVEN LIMITS OF CURRENT POLITICAL REALITIES AND THAT DIRG BEGINNING TO APPRECIATE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE ITS APPROACH TO ERITREA FROM THAT WHICH OTHER PARTS OF ETHIOPIA MAY REQUIRE. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

1. IN RESPONSE TO POL COUNSELOR'S INVITATION FOR ASSESSMENT OF RECENT EPMG MISSION TO ARAB WORLD, DR. MOHAMED ESSENTIAL TO PROTECT, SAID IT HAD BEEN SURPRISINGLY SUCCESSFUL "FOR A MAIDEN VOYAGE IN CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES." NO MIRACLES HAD BEEN ACHIEVED BUT A GOOD DEAL OF UNDERSTANDING HAD RESULTED WHERE NONE HAD EXISTED BEFORE. THE MISSION HAD SPOKEN "FOR THE NEW ETHIOPIA" AND ITS DESIRE FOR A POLITICAL SOLUTION OF THE ERITREAN PROBLEM WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ETHIOPIA'S UNITY TO GOVERNMENTS AND STATES WITH WHICH THE EMPIRE HAD HAD VIRTUALLY NO MEANINGFUL DIALOG FOR DECADES. IT HAD BEEN EXTREMELY ("MIRACULOUSLY") WELL RECEIVED IN DAMASCUS AND BAGHDAD.

2. THE SYRIANS HAD TOLD THE MISSION FRANKLY THAT THEY HAD LONG SUPPORTED THE ERITREAN INSURGENCY TO RECIPROCATATE THE EX-EMPEROR'S HOSTILITY "TOWARDS THE BA'ATH AND THE ARABS." THEY WERE NOT COMMITTED TO RETAIN THIS POSTURE VIS-A-VIS THE NEW ETHIOPIA ALTHOUGH FOR DOMESTIC POLITICAL AND INTER-ARAB REASONS THEY COULD NOT SIMPLY PUBLICLY REVERSE THEMSELVES FROM ONE DAY TO THE NEXT. THEY WERE, HOWEVER, PREPARED TO REACT POSITIVELY TO POSITIVE EPMG MOVES ON ERITREA. ALTHOUGH THE TOP SYRIAN LEADERSHIP HAD HAD AN ADEQUATE APPRECIATION OF ERITREAN COMPLEXITIES PRIOR TO THE MISSION'S ARRIVAL, DR. MOHAMED THOUGHT THAT SUBORDINATE ECHELONS IN CONTACT WITH THE MISSION HAD GAINED A BETTER SENSE OF THESE REALITIES.

3. IN CONTRAST TO THE SYRIANS, THE IRAQIS HAD HAD A RELATIVELY SIMPLISTIC IMAGE OF ERITREA AS AN "ARAB PROVINCE." THE MISSION'S EXPLANATIONS HAD OPENED THEIR EYES. THEY WERE QUICK TO DRAW PARALLELS BETWEEN THEIR KURDISH PROBLEM AND THAT OF THE EPMG IN ERITREA. LIKE THE SYRIANS, THE IRAQIS HAD EXPLAINED THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE ERITREAN INSURGENCY IN TERMS OF OPPOSITION TO ETHIOPIA'S ANCIENT REGIME AND ITS HOSTILITY TOWARDS THEM AND TOWARDS THE MOSLEM WORLD GENERALLY. WHILE THE IRAQIS HAD NOT COMMITTED THEMSELVES TO ANYTHING, DR. MOHAMED FELT THAT THEY WOULD HENCEFORTH PROCEED WITH GREATER REALISM AND POSSIBLY EVEN A DEGREE OF

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BENEVOLENCE

IN THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES.

4. THE EGYPTIANS HAD REACTED POSITIVELY TO THE MISSION'S PRESENT ATION BUT HAD URGED THE EPMG TO DO MORE TO MEET ERITREAN ASPIRATIONS AND TO MOVE FASTER. UNLIKE SOME OF THE MISSION'S OTHER INTERLOCUTORS, THE EGYPTIANS HAD A REALISTIC APPRECIATION OF

ERITREAN FACTS AND A SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT ETHIOPIA COULD AND COULD NOT ACCEPT. DR. MOHAMED SAID.

5. ASKED ABOUT SUDANESE ATTITUDES AND THE ROLE OF SUDANESE EMISSARY, MINSTATE JAMAL MOHAMED AHMED, DR. MOHAMED COMMENTED THAT THE RECENT GOS RESHUFFLE HAD BEEN A SETBACK FOR ETHIO-SUDANESE RELATIONS. MANSOUR KHALID HAD UNDERSTOOD THE PROBLEMS. HIS REPLACEMENT WAS NOT OF COMMENSURATE CALIBER. HE HAD BROUGHT ONLY NIMEIRY'S THREE POINTS (CEASEFIRE, RELEASE OF ERITREAN POLITICAL PRISONERS AND NEGOTIATIONS) BUT IT HAD BEEN AN ERROR TO PUBLICIZE THEM. "NEGOTIATIONS MIGHT ALREADY BE UNDER WAY IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR THE PUBLICITY."

6. ASKED ABOUT THE WILLINGNESS OF THE EPMG'S ERITREAN INTER-LOCUTORS TO RETURN TO NEGOTIATIONS, DR. MOHAMED ASSERTED THAT THE LEADERS OF ALL INSURGENT FACTIONS WERE WILLING TO DO SO. ONLY WOLDEAB WOLDE-MARIAM HAD YET TO BE HEARD FROM. DR. MOHAMED FELT CONFIDENT THAT NEGOTIATIONS WOULD RESUME SHORTLY.

7. ACCORDING TO DR. MOHAMED, FINALLY, THE "DIRG" WAS LEARNING BY EXPERIENCE THAT THE ERITREAN PROBLEM HAD TO BE TACKLED ON ITS OWN TERMS. THE DIRG'S EARLIER GUIDING PRINCIPLE THAT NO CONCESSIONS SHOULD BE OFFERED ERITREA WHICH COULD NOT ALSO BE OFFERED OTHER REGIONS OR PROVINCES WAS SEEN TO BE INCREASINGLY INADEQUATE. DR. MOHAMED SAID THAT THE DIRG WAS SHIFTING IN FAVOR OF "ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY" AND, HE FELT, THIS WAS LIKELY TO PROVE A SOUNDER BASIS FOR ETHIOPIA'S UNITY THAN EARLIER RIGIDITIES HAD BEEN.

8. ASKED ABOUT HIS PERSONAL SITUATION, DR. MOHAMED ACKNOWLEDGED THERE HAD BEEN TALK ABOUT A REPLACEMENT FOR HIM AND ABOUT HIS IMMINENT DEFECTION. HE SAID BOTH STORIES WERE PURE FROTH AND INDICATED THAT HE CONTINUED TO FEEL REASONABLY SECURE IN
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OFFICE.

9. COMMENT. DR. MOHAMED IS AN EBULLIENT OPTIMISTIC PERSONALITY. HE KNEW, OF COURSE, THAT HIS COMMENTS WOULD BE REPORTED TO THE USG. MOREOVER, HE IS A PATRIOT WHO WOULD LIKE TO PROJECT THE BEST POSSIBLE IMAGE OF THE SITUATION HERE. HIS COMMENTS THEREFORE ARE LIKELY SOMEWHAT ON THE ROSY SIDE. THIS HAVING BEEN SAID, THEY SHOULD NOT BE OVERLY DISCOUNTED EITHER. WE THUS THINK IT POSSIBLE THAT DR. MOHAMED'S STATEMENTS, FOR EXAMPLE ON ETHIO-SYRIAN RELATIONS, REFLECTED FAIRLY ACCURATELY THE UNDERLYING SITUATION WHICH OBTAINED DURING THE EPMG MISSION AND DO NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY THAT IT REMAINS VALID TODAY (AT LEAST INsofar AS ADDIS IS CONCERNED) DESPITE THE COMBAT OPERATIONS CONDUCTED IN ERITREA SINCE EARLY FEBRUARY AND THE RECENT PUBLIC EXCHANGE OF SHARP WORDS BETWEEN THE TWO GOVERNMENTS.

WE ATTACH PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE, HOWEVER, TO DR. MOHAMED'S FLAT
ASSERTION THAT THE EPMG IS IN TOUCH WITH ALL INSURGENT LEADERS
(WOLDEAB EXCEPTED) AND HIS ESTIMATE THAT NEGOTIATIONS WITH THEM
WILL SHORTLY RESUME.

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